THE FOURTH CHURCH PULPIT

When You Pray, Say...Hallowed Be Your Name

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God does not die on the day when we cease to believe in a personal deity, but we die on the day when our lives cease to be illumined by the steady radiance, renewed daily, of a wonder, the source of which is beyond all reason.

Dag Hammarskjold
Markings

FOURTH
PRESBY
TERIAN
CHURCH
A LIGHT IN THE CITY

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WHEN YOU PRAY, SAY...HALLOWED BE YOUR NAME

Exodus 3:1-6; Matthew 6:5-15

"Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground." Exodus 3:5

Startle us, O God, with your truth, and open our hearts and our minds to your love. Speak your word to us in our hymns and scripture, our speaking and listening. Silence in us any voice but yours in this hour. And give us grace to love you, to honor you, and to trust you with our lives, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

* * *

Author Annie Dillard grew up in a Presbyterian church in Pittsburgh, became a Roman Catholic not long ago and when she writes about matters of the spirit, which she does a lot, she does so with deep sensitivity and integrity. And when she writes about institutional religion, which she does occasionally, those of us involved should sit up and take notice. One time she wrote about going to church on Sunday morning...

> "There is a singing group in the Catholic church today, a singing group which calls itself 'Wildflowers.' The lead is a tall, square-jawed teen-aged boy, buoyant and glad to be here. He carries a guitar: he plucks out a little bluesy riff and hits some chords. With him are the rest of the Wildflowers. There is an old woman, wonderfully determined: she has long orange hair and is dressed country and western style. Beside her stands a frail, withdrawn fourteen-year-old boy, and a large Chinese man in his twenties who seems to want to enjoy himself but is not quite sure how to. They straggle out in front of the altar and teach us a brand new hymn.
>
> "It all seems a pity at first, for I have overcome a fiercely anti-Catholic upbringing in order to attend mass simply and solely to escape Protestant guitars. Why am I here? Who gave these nice Catholics guitars? Why are we not mumbling in Latin and performing superstitious rituals? What is the Pope thinking of?"

The service continues and it's dreadful. No one, least of all the organist, could find the opening hymn. Then no one knew it. Then no one could sing it anyway. There was no sermon, only announcements. The priest introduced the rascally acolyte who was going to light the two Advent candles, but the candles were already lighted.

Dillard reflects:

> "Week after week we witness the same miracle: that God is so mighty he can stifle his own laughter. Week after week we witness the same miracle: that God, for reasons unfathomable, refrains from blowing our dancing bear act to smithereens..." [*Teaching a Stone to Talk, An Expedition to the Pole*, pp. 35-38]

Dillard is one of a significant number of writers who take religion very seriously and who write, or have written, about matters of the spirit with passion and eloquence: John Updike, Flannery O'Connor, Eudora Welty, John Cheever, and to a person, they and many others, write about the absence of a sense of the holy, the absence of awe, reverence, sanctity in American life – even American church life.

Dillard writes:

> "On the whole, I do not find Christians, outside of the catacombs, sufficiently sensible of conditions. Does anyone have the foggiest idea what sort of power we so blithely invoke?
>
> Or, as I suspect, does no one believe a word of it? It is madness to wear ladies straw hats and velvet hats to church: we should all be wearing crash helmets. Ushers should issue life preservers and signal flares: they should lash us to our pews." [p. 58]

* * *

Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name.

We are thinking about prayer during Lent this year, specifically the little prayer Jesus taught his disciples one time. He prayed a lot. He would have used the psalms in his praying, but he also apparently prayed without reference to a prepared resource – prayed from the heart. His disciples were not familiar with that practice and that is what they meant when they asked him to teach them to pray.

The little prayer he taught, the Lord's Prayer, is, someone noted, a compendium of the Christian faith. It is surely the most widespread religious liturgy in the world, perhaps the only prayer we know by memory. You learned it when you were a little girl or boy. Every minute of every day someone somewhere in the world is saying the "Our Father," praying the prayer Jesus taught his disciples, the prayer we all learned as children.

It begins with the boldest thing anyone ever said about God. "When you pray, say Father...." The genius of Jesus' own religion was its extreme caution about the name of God. The Hebrews understood that to name something is to imply understanding and, to a degree, control. We know about that – about the power of language, of names, to effect behavior and even being. We know that if you call a child stupid and irresponsible, the child will sooner or later internalize those names and begin to act like that. We know the demeaning and dehumanizing power of racist rhetoric. The genius of ancient Judaism was that it understood the oneness and transcendence of God and the elemental fact that any name you give to God limits God. And so the Hebrew designation for God, YHWH, four consonants, is not said out loud in Israel.

And so it is a stunning moment when Jesus teaches them to use a term of intimacy and immediacy and closeness. Elsewhere he will call God "Abba," the Aramaic name children use for their father in the family circle, the only English equivalent for which is "Daddy." Father is a term which in that culture gathered up maternal characteristics of nurture, compassion and tenderness as well as traditional masculine traits of strength, wisdom, protection. Gender was not the issue. Hebrew religion knows better. Humans are made in God's image, male and female. God is like a mother comforting her children, a father with compassion for his children.

In that teaching moment, Jesus invites us to put aside our speculation about the existence and attributes of God or God's gender and address God personally, directly and immediately. "Father." And then, "Hallowed be your name."

Religion begins when you say that word, "Hallowed."

Frederick Buechner wrote:

> "Moses with his flocks in Midian. Buddha under the Bo tree. Jesus up to his knees in the waters of the Jordan. Each of them responds to something for which words like – God – are only pallid, alphabetical souvenirs. Religion as an institution, as ethics, as dogma, as social action, all of this comes later. Religion starts, as Frost said poems do, with a lump in the throat, to put it mildly, or with the bush going up in flames, the rain of flowers, the dove coming down out of the sky." [*The Alphabet of Grace*, p. 14]

That's exactly what happens one day as Moses tends his father-in-law's sheep in the wilderness of Midian. Remember the story of Moses? It's quite an adventure. Born into the Jewish slave community in Egypt, Moses is saved from Pharaoh's ethnic cleansing by being placed in a basket and floated down the river, rescued by Pharaoh's own daughter, brought up in the royal household, given rank, prestige and privilege. One day he sees an Egyptian officer beating a Jewish slave and in a rage kills the Egyptian. After a harrowing escape into the wilderness he finds a wife with an affluent father, becomes part of the family business, and starts to rise up the corporate ladder.

It's in the wilderness, tending the family assets, the sheep, that the bush goes up in flames and the voice comes.

> "Moses, Moses...!"
> "Here I am,"
> "Come no closer! Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground ..."
> "And Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God."

Biblical religion begins with a mystical experience that cannot always be explained rationally. Biblical religion begins with a God who is different, a God who exists outside human experience, human categories of thinking and understanding, a God who is holy, a God in whose presence we are not, at first, altogether comfortable, a God who cannot be reduced to a theological common denominator, or forced into our intellectual categories. And this religion's first manifestation is an acknowledgment of that holiness – kneeling, falling on your face, taking off your shoes.

That's the point, of course, of Annie Dillard's commentary. It's not that there is anything wrong with guitars. It's not that the pipe organ is the only appropriate musical instrument for worship. It is that God, and the whole enterprise of relating to God, worshipping God, has become familiar, cozy, comfortable and trivial.

In a fine new book, *Reaching Out Without Dumbing Down*, Marva Dawn, a Notre Dame Ph.D. in theology, ponders the impact our generation's focus on the self, individualism, the celebration of self, elevation of self as final arbiter of all things has had on religion and worship, particularly. Dawn believes that in our generation the focus of public worship has shifted from God to us – from the adoration and praise of God to the nurturing and cultivating of the human experience of adoring and praising. The casualty, she believes, is awe, reverence, holiness – the very foundation of the whole experience of the Bible.

> "Some congregations are replacing the invocation with a casual greeting – to create community and make worshippers feel comfortable.... It is almost as if the priest invites us into his living room instead of God welcoming us into his presence." [p. 78]

I, for one, find it disconcerting to sit down in pew, engage in prayer to bring myself into the presence of God and then have the worship leader stand up and say, "Good morning. How are you all today?" When there is no mystery, no awe, no elemental wonder, when worship becomes too comfy, cozy, chatty, and chummy, God, inevitably, is trivialized.

It is not an easy argument to make or to buy these days. The market economy in which we live wants to turn everything into a consumer product which lives or dies on the basis of customer satisfaction. Now religion, I believe, needs a little bit of that every now and then. Religion can be and often is boring and doesn't need to be. Religion can be and often is irrelevant precisely because it doesn't ask market questions about where people are – how they're hurting, what they're worrying about and hoping for. But when religion becomes a consumer product, the act of public worship, for instance, subtly changes from a corporate opportunity to acknowledge God, praise God, into an experience which feels good and brings the customer back next week for more.

Soren Kierkegaard, a nineteenth century Danish theologian, anticipated the direction we were headed. People more and more go to church as if they were going to a theater, he said. They go to be an audience. The actors are the clergy and choir. God, everyone hopes, serves as the prompter helping clergy and choir with a little inspiration for their act. The experience can be evaluated on the basis of theater criteria. Was it good? Did I laugh, cry, respond emotionally? In actuality, Kierkegaard said, the theater metaphor is valid, but we get the players mixed up. The audience is God. The actors are the people who come there to do something for God – to worship. The prompters are the clergy and choir whose job is not to entertain, not to focus attention on themselves, but to help the people worship, to draw attention to God – for whose sake we have gone to all this trouble.

How important is this? I think we are beginning to understand a point the philosophers were making a century ago, namely, if nothing is sacred anything goes – anything is allowed. John Killinger, in a little book entitled *The God Called Hallowed,* says that a sense of the holy is like a tent pole that holds up everything.

One of the great prophets of our century, Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, said:

> "Indifference to the sublime wonder of living lies behind all the evils that have befallen our sorry century. Modern man fell into the trap of believing that everything can be explained, that reality is a simple affair which has only to be organized to be mastered." [see Madeleine L'Engle, *A Stone For a Pillow*, p. 133]

But then, out of the blue, you and I experience the holy, or, rather, God in his holiness comes into our lives.

We witness the astonishing miracle of human birth and we know at a level deeper in us than biology, anatomy, genetics, the mystery and miracle of life.

Hallowed be your name.

Or, we peer into an electron microscope and for a moment experience the incredible and surprising complexity of life, and with each further scientific step into a micro world a thousand times tinier than our eyes can see, we know about holiness.

Hallowed by your name.

Or we peer outward through the lenses of the Hubble telescope into deep space, a thousand million light years, expanding into what? Into infinity? And we know about holiness.

Hallowed be your name.

Or we see a bright starry sky or a single violet and the simple beauty of it stops us in our tracks.

Hallowed be your name.

Or the touch of our beloved's hand at a time of fear and uncertainty reminds us we are not alone … or a child's unrestrained hug reminds us of love and trust and faithfulness at the heart of our existence as human beings.

Hallowed be your name.

Or we are revolted by stories of life discarded, life that doesn't seem to matter to anyone: the cries of poor children not far from here, and our revulsion is because in our hearts we say "hallowed be your name" and know about holiness.

Or we are blessed to sit by the bedside of a dear one whose final moments of life confirm for us, even in our grief, the sanctity and blessing and holiness of it all.

Hallowed be your name.

Helmut Thielicke, a scholarly German pastor who preached in Stuttgart through the final and ghastly days of World War II, preached a series of sermons on the Lord's Prayer to his congregation. He began in the gorgeous old Church of the Hospitallers and when it was destroyed, continued in the only auditorium space available. And he said about praying, "Hallowed be thy name...."

> "Everything depends on your being willing to honor God and let God work in your life, simply to stand still and let him be the Holy One who will actually have first place in your life." [*Our Heavenly Father*, p. 51]

That's the point. To say "hallowed be your name" is to make a tremendous affirmation about God but also about yourself. It says you believe, even if you do not understand, that there is a God, a power beyond all imagining, a beginning and an ending, a mysterious holy Other whose purposes are somehow reflected in the creation.

It says you wish to be in relationship with the One who made you, the mysterious holy God who is above and beyond all names.

It says you want that relationship to be close: you want to live as a child of God.

That's what our religion is about finally. It's not about rules and regulations, who's in – who's out, who's more righteous or more pure. It's not about brilliant theology or entertaining worship.

It's about you and God. It's about you and me, living in relationship with the One who made us and loves us and who came to be among us in the one who teaches us to pray.

He – Jesus Christ, Son of God – will show us finally the meaning of holiness – as in perfect obedience to God and in perfect love for us, he goes to the cross and makes that spot, that lonely hill, for us, forever the holiest ground of all.

It begins when we say, "Father, hallowed be your name."

And so, you are invited, even if you stopped praying a long time ago, even if there is a long and deep silence between you and God, particularly if you are not satisfied with the silence, you are invited to make two words the beginning of a new conversation, a new relationship.

"Father – Hallowed."

Amen.